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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0198
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RHMFISS/HQ USSOCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 CHENNAI 000170

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: A NIGHT ON KARNATAKA'S CAMPAIGN TRAIL

REF: A) Chennai 168, B) Chennai 167, C) Chennai 119, D) 07 Chennai
52

11. (U) Summary: Elections for the South India state of Karnataka's legislative assembly begin on May 10 (refs A and B), and new interpretations of the restrictions on what candidates may -- and may not -- do have changed how campaigns are conducted. No longer can candidates spend unaccounted-for campaign money on alcohol and other gifts for potential supporters, at least not openly. Some candidates may be breaking the rules, but others are simply complaining and accepting a new way of doing business. We followed one candidate as he campaigned in Bangalore, knocking on doors, making speeches, and shaking hands. End Summary.

Retail politics, as it once was

12. (U) We spent the rainy evening of April 30 following one candidate for Karnataka's legislative assembly as he hit the campaign trail in the Bangalore neighborhood of Shivajinagar. The candidate, R. Roshan Baig, the Congress Party candidate for the Shivajinagar constituency running for his fifth term, told us that the redistricting process ("delimitation" in the Indian political vernacular, ref C) had added this particular neighborhood to his constituency, so it was important for him to meet its residents in the flesh. Baig explained that his constituency had some 166,000 residents, 55,000 of whom are Muslim and 10,000 Christian.

13. (SBU) Baig, a Muslim, told us that his main competitor for the seat was the BJP's candidate, Nirmal Surana. Baig described Surana as having links to the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). He also said that Surana played a key role in fomenting the violence Bangalore saw in January 2007, when groups of Hindus and Muslims clashed during demonstrations protesting the execution of Saddam Hussein, resulting in dozens of injuries and the death of a teenager (ref D).

Pressing the flesh, recycling the garlands

14. (U) Shivajinagar is a heavily Muslim warren of alleyways and Baig -- sweating profusely in an uncomfortable-looking, solid-white suit -- tirelessly traipsed through all of them. A gaggle of a hundred or so supporters, almost all of them young men, followed closely behind. Occasionally, Baig would send a group of his supporters ahead and instruct them to start a cheer. This invariably attracted attention, drawing the neighborhood's residents to their windows or doorways, where Baig would greet them with an "Asalaam Alaikum," introduce himself, and ask for their vote. (In a later discussion

with a Bangalore businessman, we learned that politicians generally pay these cheering "supporters" INR 200 per day -- about USD 5. The businessman complained that the election campaign was causing a shortage of unskilled day laborers, who usually make about INR 80, because they were all opting to march for politicians instead of performing their usual work.)

15. (SBU) Every now and again, Baig would duck into a house or an apartment to meet families and quaff a cup of tea or milk. At many of the doorways to these dwellings, Baig would receive numerous garlands, which he would quickly remove and hand to one of his many attendants, a polite gesture intended to convey a sense of humility. (We noticed that these attendants would then "recycle" these garlands by taking them to the next house for the next round of garlanding.) In front of one house, Baig received a Hindu blessing from a couple of women bearing "aarthi plates," essentially pie pans filled with melted wax supporting a lit wick that the women then poured out at his feet. As we walked away, we noticed member of Baig's entourage slip the women a pair of 100-rupee notes.

16. (U) At one stop, an elderly Muslim man beseeched Baig to do something about the lack of an effective drainage system outside his shop. He pointed out a foot-high wall that he had built in the shop's doorway to help keep floodwaters out. Baig told the man that he would look into it, but pointed out that the lack of a proper sewer system in the neighborhood was a major engineering problem that could not be fixed immediately.

The new rules of the campaign game

CHENNAI 00000170 002 OF 003

17. (U) Baig told us that this person-to-person campaigning was particularly important this election, because election officials were enforcing strictly rules that generally prevent the posters and bunting that usually adorn the state during campaigns. (Indeed, one of the striking aspects about our visit to southern Karnataka April 30 to May 2 was the lack of posters or any other indication that it was the height of the campaign season.) He said that election commission auditors were assigned to candidates' campaigns as "shadow accountants," scrutinizing every expenditure -- no matter how small -- and disallowing anything that did not comply with the rules. Baig said that he attracted crowds of 500 to 600 supporters that followed him on some of his initial campaigning, but that the election commission instructed him that crowds of this size were too large and disruptive, forcing him to limit the number of people who could accompany him on his campaign excursions. As he strolled through one alley, Baig pointed out a man with a video camera. "That's an election monitor," he said, "and he's making sure that I don't have too many people following me around."

18. (U) Baig also said that approval of the election officials must be obtained before speaking to a group, and several times we saw him ask one of his assistants if they had obtained the appropriate permission. At one stop, someone put a microphone in his hand and he prepared to speak, but then asked one of his assistants quietly if this was a stop authorized by the election commission. When the assistant indicated he was unsure, Baig handed the microphone back without speaking, waved to those present, shook a few hands, and continued on.

It helps to be a polyglot

19. (U) At one apparently authorized stop, Baig and some of his supporters addressed in Urdu a crowd of some 200 people. (When we asked later what his message was, he explained that he emphasized the importance of stability in government -- a swipe at the state's previous ruling coalition -- and spoke against communalism.) While Baig was speaking, one of his attendants handed him a small piece of paper with the message (in English): "kindly speak a few words of Tamil." Baig, who was addressing the crowd without notes, then began speaking in Tamil, apparently addressing in particular a group of women near the front of the crowd whose faces lit up as soon as he did so. He also spoke a bit in Kannada, the dominant language in

most of Karnataka, but told us later that relatively few people in this neighborhood spoke the state's lingua franca as their primary language.

Exceptions to every rule

¶10. (U) Bangalore's press is full of complaints by candidates who say that the new rules are stifling their ability to campaign. Top candidates from all three of the state's main parties -- the Congress Party, BJP, and JDS -- have had election commission officers impound their vehicles (including a helicopter in one case) and other equipment. Some press reports suggest that some candidates are assigning supporters to surveil election commission personnel so that the candidates will not be caught by a surprise inspection. Other reports have stated that candidates are finding ways to bend the rules, for example, by giving coupons redeemable for items ranging from televisions to booze, rather than by giving away the items themselves. All commentators seem to agree, though, that this sort of blatant vote-buying is less prevalent than in previous campaigns, and that election officials are genuinely cracking down on campaign misbehavior. There certainly seems to be no shortage of election commission personnel available to enforce the rules: on our three-day trip to Karnataka, we observed more vehicles carrying "Election Commission" placards than vehicles sporting campaign posters.

¶11. (SBU) The Karnataka-based National General Secretary of the Bhujan Samaj Party, P.G.R. Sindhia, told us that the strict enforcement of these campaign restrictions is playing well in the middle and upper classes, who like to see their cities free of the usual campaign paraphernalia. The poor, however, are far less enthusiastic with the new strictures, as campaigns usually provide them with a wide variety of freebies like pens, watches, and other trinkets which are being denied this time around.

Comment

CHENNAI 00000170 003 OF 003

¶12. (U) Baig may be a multi-term incumbent, but he was still working hard to keep his seat in the legislative assembly. This kind of personal campaigning particularly important in an election, like this one, where the parties are not underlining their differences on any particular major issue. The BJP is stressing its administrative competence while Congress is emphasizing the fact that it can bring stability to the state's government, but, as the editor of a major daily told us, "they're two sides of the same coin." Baig's campaign tactics are physically demanding, and he told us that he has been at it day and night for weeks. We'll find out soon if his efforts will pay off.

¶13. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy New Delhi.

HOPPER